



**Aalborg Universitet**

**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

## **Review of The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader**

Dorfman, Ben

*Published in:*  
Cultural Dynamics

*Publication date:*  
2002

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Dorfman, B. (2002). Review of The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader. *Cultural Dynamics*, 14(2), 229-232.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- ? Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- ? You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- ? You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# Cultural Dynamics

<http://cdy.sagepub.com>

---

## **Book Review**

*Cultural Dynamics* 2002; 14; 229

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://cdy.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/14/2/229>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Cultural Dynamics* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://cdy.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://cdy.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

## BOOK REVIEW



LUCY BURKE, TONY CROWLEY AND ALAN GIRVIN, eds

*The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2000, 511 pp. (index included), ISBN 0-415-18681-1

It is the case (as Antony Easthope notes on the book jacket) that *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* fills a gap—a volume of primary texts that speaks to the theoretical connection between language and culture in the 20th century and is useful to both the student and professional scholar. I have been able to find no other reader that thematizes this connection so directly and thoroughly. For example, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), edited by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffin, includes many nice pieces on language out of the literature on postcolonialism, as does Patrick Williams's and Laura Chrisman's *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Neither, however (and understandably), provides the account of linguistic theory offered in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*. Peter Brooker's *Cultural Theory: A Glossary* (London: OUP, 1999) is useful but brief and quite oriented toward cultural theory alone, and Antony Easthope's and Kate McGowan's *Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) addresses the linguistic-cultural theory connection, but through the lenses of critical theory, which has a different set of priorities than linguistic theory as such. Moreover, the editors of *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* have correctly identified half of the reason for addressing the connection between linguistic and cultural theory—that language has been viewed as a 'historical battleground' through much of the 20th century. (The related argument, of course, is that language has been used *on* the historical battleground of the 20th century, especially in relation to identity.)

Thus, *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* is situated in a seemingly obvious yet surprisingly neglected intellectual space: the history of ideas on language and culture that emerged on the back of the particularization of identities in both western and global contexts through the course of recent history. If we are to think seriously about this history of ideas, it would seem that bringing many of its major documents to one place is useful, if not necessary. Burke, Crowley and Girvin should be applauded

for doing this; in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, one can read substantive pieces of writing by Saussure, Croce, Freud and Bakhtin at one end of the 20th century, Thiong'o, Bourdieu and Deborah Cameron at the other end, and Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Fanon, Kristeva and Irigaray in between.

The problems with *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* are essentially two. The first is that the question of culture is more than theoretical; it is also historical. This assertion is not a matter of separating out history from theory, or vice versa—quite the opposite. Surely, the occasion for much of 20th-century cultural theory, and 20th-century linguistic theory that thematizes cultural issues, is the emergence of historical movements (for example, feminism, ethnic nationalism) that face us with the problem of culture by either suggesting language as a problem of culture or deploying strategic approaches to language as part of their programs. While the question of such movements is implicit in many of the selections contained in the reader—especially those to do with postcoloniality, sexuality, gender, and class—they are not explicitly addressed by the editors in their introductory remarks, neither to the volume as a whole nor to the individual sections by which they group the readings. The sections 'Language and Gender' (with selections from Spender, Lakoff, Cixous, Denise Riley, and Judith Butler), 'Language and Sexuality' (Irigaray, Edmund White, Hortense Spillers, and Deborah Cameron), and 'Language and Colonialism' (Fanon, Achebe, and Thiong'o), for example, are appropriately selected, and the choices of specific texts prudent.

However, the questions raised in many of those texts often arise from and address *de facto* historical situations that cleared the ground for culture and language to even stand as contested ideas. Fanon, Achebe, and Thiong'o, for example, very much addressed material issues attendant to the dismantling of the imperial system in the post-war era (for example, what would the new post-imperial African political identities be? what were the effects of Anglicized education?), meaning that their ideas are attached to the event of post-war ethnic nationalism. Cixous, to offer another example, made a highly political decision in having her works published with Éditions de Femmes (the publishing house of *Psych et Po*) in the charged atmosphere of 1970s French feminism, a politics not completely divorceable from her idea of an *écriture féminine*. In the Routledge reader, what we *do* get for historical examples of the problem of language and culture is a three or four line discussion of the demise of Irish culture in the 18th century at the hands of the English—an event not addressed by any of the included texts, whereas feminism and ethnic nationalism clearly are. Especially for the student, some contextual discussion in the editorial remarks of the history that makes the writings contained in the collection so urgent—most noticeably the critical mass of feminism and ethnic nationalism in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—seems necessary.

The second problem with the reader is its lack of address to distinct sets of concepts that underwrite the intellectual swath of the work as a whole: structuralism and poststructuralism on one hand, and modernism and postmodernism on the other. This is a more fundamental problem because it has to do with the terrain on which the reader operates, as opposed to where it should operate. At the same time that historical movements (e.g. feminism, ethnic nationalism) face us with the problem of culture and language, it is also surely the case that the intellectual debates bound up with that history have very much played out under the headings of structuralism and poststructuralism and modernism and postmodernism. Of course, these seemingly easy ‘-isms’ have fallen out of fashion in recent years. Nonetheless, if the point is to provide a fair and rich survey of linguistic and cultural theory in the 20th century—which it seems to be—the question of what structuralism/poststructuralism and modernism/postmodernism mean should certainly be addressed in the editors’ remarks, if not in explicit sections (with perhaps some selections from Lyotard, Habermas, and Jameson). In the first section of the text, ‘Theorising the Sign’ (with selections by Saussure, Croce, and Voloshinov) we are given the indication that at least the issue of structuralism versus poststructuralism will be thematized; the editors define the idea of structuralism, and employ Jameson’s idea that structuralism suggests language as a ‘prison house’, denying human historical agency. However, in the obvious sections where this theme might be taken up again (‘Language in History’—Saussure, Spitzer, Williams, Muriel Schulz, Deborah Cameron; ‘Language and Subjectivity’—Saussure, Whorf, Vygotsky, Freud, and Lacan; and ‘Order and Difference’—Mukarovsky, Foucault, and Derrida), it is not. And I cannot find any mention of modernism or postmodernism in the text at all. These are lacks that reduce the effectiveness of the text as a general reader addressing language and cultural theory in the 20th century.

The strength of the volume lies in the primary texts themselves. The editors have selected important pieces, and given us substantive, informative samples of each of them (although I also wonder why there is no Heidegger, especially Heidegger after the turn). It is useful for this reason and also because it takes important pieces of postcolonial theory, feminist and gender theory, and linguistic theory and puts them in one place, an act that allows the texts themselves to reveal the connections among them. Finally, the collection also gives us a sense of the surprising degree of continuity and comprehensible lines of development between early and late 20th-century linguistic and cultural theorists (we might be reminded of Derrida’s criticism of Lévi-Strauss here, that historical changes do not occur in ‘one fell swoop’). However, *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* would ultimately be more meaningful if it critically addressed why we are interested in language and cultural theory in the first

place, and devoted much more attention to arguably the two most contested issues in those domains: structuralism versus post-structuralism and modernism versus postmodernism.

BEN DORFMAN  
*University of Kansas*